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Define American Statement on NBC Executive’s Use of “Illegals”

November 19th, 2015, New York, NY – Amid reports that NBC News President Deborah Turness used the phrase “illegals” to refer to undocumented immigrants in a recent meeting, Define American urges all the network’s staff to review and follow NBC’s publicly stated policy of using the term “undocumented.”

The effort to shift the media’s use around dehumanizing and inaccurate language is at the core of Define American’s [#wordsmatter campaign](#). In addition to racist overtones, the term “illegal” is factually flawed. Being in the U.S. without proper documents is a civil offense, not a criminal one.

“We are not trying to legislate speech, but rather educate on why the rhetoric around immigration – particularly from those in prominent positions – plays such a critical role in the public’s perception of the 11.7 million undocumented Americans living in this country,” said Rev. Ryan M. Eller, Executive Director of Define American. “I would like to personally invite Ms. Turness to have a conversation with undocumented immigrants and allies about the very real reasons terms such as ‘illegals’ are antiquated, offensive and inaccurate.”

With immigration at the forefront of our cultural discourse, the words used by media – and leaders of media outlets - matter more than ever. At the urging of Define American and other groups, many other leading media outlets - including the Associated Press, ABC and NBC - have adjusted their guidelines to prohibit the use of “illegal” when referring to undocumented immigrants. As the AP’s stylebook now notes, “Except in direct quotes essential to the story, use illegal only to refer to an action, not a person.”

[Define American](#) is a media and culture organization using the power of stories to transcend politics and shift the conversation around immigrants, identity and citizenship in a changing America.

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